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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 000476

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [BA](#) [POL](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: SMALL-SCALE VIOLENT CLASHES CONTINUE TO ROIL
BAHRAIN'S SHIA VILLAGES

REF: A. MANAMA 0264

[1](#)B. MANAMA 0184

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Following the March 10 violent protest at Dana Mall, small bands of masked youth have clashed with security forces in scattered, sporadic confrontations. The incidents typically begin with young men burning tires or trash dumpsters on the edge of a village, and throwing Molotov cocktails at police vehicles when the security forces arrive. Police routinely employ tear gas to disperse the protesters. Villagers caught in the middle have demanded that the youth stop provoking the police as small children, the sick and elderly are harmed by the gas. An Al Wifaq leader said the breakaway hard line Shia Haq Movement has the power to stop the clashes, but its leaders have been silent. In the competition between Al Wifaq and Haq Movement for support of the Shia community, it appears that Haq may have overreached and provoked a backlash that could damage its longer term support. End Summary.

Scattered, Sporadic Confrontations Follow Mall Incident

[1](#)2. (U) Small-scale clashes pitting as few as 10 protesters against security forces continue to take place in a scattered fashion in Bahrain's northern and western band of Shia villages following a larger confrontation March 10 that spilled into a shopping mall located on the edge of a Manama area village. On any given night, there may be only one or two incidents, or even none at all. Some of the villages that have been sites of violence are Sanabis, Daih, Diraz, Bani Jamra, and Tashan. Downtown Manama has been mostly quiet.

[1](#)3. (U) The March 10 conflict occurred on the first of three days of Formula One racing in Bahrain, when thousands of foreigners were in the country. A demonstration was organized in support of 19 youths serving one- and two-year sentences for their participation in a December 25 riot at Bahrain International Airport (reftels). According to

organizers from the hard line Shia Haq Movement, small groups of instigators in the demonstration provoked violent reactions from riot police. The clashes spilled into the Dana Mall, located on the edge of Sanabis, with police and demonstrators fighting in shops, corridors, and the food court. Outside the mall, rioters burned tires and threw stones and Molotov cocktails while police shot tear gas. There are unconfirmed reports of police using rubber bullets. The police detained 23 suspects for illegal gathering, sabotage, and harassing police officers.

Molotov Cocktails vs Tear Gas

14. (U) Since the Dana Mall incident, small groups of masked men have confronted police using similar tactics in different locations: burning tires or trash dumpsters on the edge of a village and, when the police respond, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. The police routinely resort to tear gas to disperse the youths. In one incident, fire from a burning car spread to an apartment building housing groups of South Asian laborers, an image reminiscent of the attacks aimed at foreign workers in the mid-1990s. There have been no reports of arrests or injuries in the clashes. Both the parliament and the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry issued statements condemning the violence and "sabotage" of public and private property.

15. (U) Arabic daily Al Wasat journalist Saeed Mohammed published reports March 19-20 based upon interviews with some of the youths involved in the confrontations. Their ages range from 15 to 25, but the bulk were middle school or high school students. Mohammed asked why they protested violently

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when they had the legal right to demonstrate and express their opinions peacefully. One replied, "The government does not accept dialogue or any other approach." He blamed the security forces for provoking violence. Others said they were not rioting but "using force" to express their demands and reinstate their rights.

Residents to Protesters: Stop!

16. (U) Mohammed also reported that residents of some of the villages where the confrontations have taken place told him they were sick of the clashes and urged their fellow citizens to stop the instigators. One man called on political leaders, religious scholars, and security officials to deal with the phenomenon of violence. Some demanded that police stop using tear gas because residents are being punished for what others do.

17. (C) A businessman and landlord from Sanabis told the DCM March 18 that he and his fellow residents were organizing to stop young people from "terrorizing" the village. The residents had posted signs in and around mosques and community centers with a message to the youth saying, "If you don't stop, we'll take care of you ourselves." Repeated police use of tear gas was harming residents, including his three- and five-year old daughters, who he had to bring to the hospital because of vomiting and dizziness. The businessman said there were 20-30 youths responsible for the violence in Sanabis and residents knew who they were.

Clerics Weigh In

18. (U) In their Friday prayer sermons March 17, several clerics addressed the Dana Mall violence and subsequent incidents. Shia Shaikh Issa Qassem said the political situation in Bahrain is suffering from a deterioration in

security. He attributed the situation to the government's refusal to engage seriously with the opposition on its concerns about the constitution. He said the government had "closed the door of dialogue" and increased the gap between the people and government. Sunni Shaikh Juma Tawfiq criticized the rioters and highlighted the importance of stability and security. He reminded demonstrators that the government had tried to address their concerns on the family law, housing, and employment.

¶9. (U) Al Wifaq President Shaikh Ali Salman launched an attack on the instigators, calling them "self-serving opportunists." "The acts of sabotage targeting public property invariably hurt the people who work in these facilities. Whenever we engage in an activity, we must make sure that we convey the message we want others to hear. Our activities must not result in harming others or destroying property." According to a reporter, Salman's statement was a clear indication that Al Wifaq was disassociating itself from the provocateurs and the clashes.

Haq Movement Responsible

¶10. (C) Al Wifaq Advisory Council member Nizar Al Qari told EmbOffs March 20 that the hard line Shia Haq Movement had created the conditions for the continuing clashes with police. Haq was responsible for the Dana Mall protest and, while it did not call for continuing confrontations, its leaders had not said or signaled that the violence should stop. This was enough for the young people to continue to fight. He noted that Haq leader (and former Al Wifaq vice president) Hassan Mushaima and Ali Salman would meet that night to discuss the security situation. This was the first formal meeting between the two organizations.

¶11. (C) Al Qari stated that while Al Wifaq was not involved in the protests or clashes, it would not "serve as a policeman for the government." It was the government's responsibility to find a way to stop the incidents. He said

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he almost wished a protester or police officer would be killed because then the King would have to get involved in a serious way. "The King has been ignoring us," Al Qari said.

¶12. (C) Al Qari indicated villagers are getting fed up with the clashes. Because of his position in Al Wifaq, women from his home village of Daih had approached his mother and asked her to organize a meeting with Ali Salman. Al Qari said his mother is a simple, non-political woman, but that she and her friends were angry that their village was being used to launch attacks on the police.

Time for Leaders to Step Up

¶13. (U) Press commentary has fallen along predictable lines, with Sunni columnists condemning the rioters and Shia accusing the government of ignoring their community's demands and complaining of excessive use of force by police. Al Wasat Editor-in-Chief Mansour Al Jamry wrote March 19 that it was the residents of the villages who were paying the price of the actions of a few young men. "Some readers called and others sent letters complaining about the situation in their villages, saying that their suffering is double because this time they are harmed by a group of unknown rioters from their areas and not by the government, and because leaders are scared to take a clear stance on the incidents." In a separate March 18 column, he wrote, "I hope that those who appoint themselves leaders of the people realize that their silence is dangerous. You are wrong for neglecting your responsibility."

¶14. (U) In a March 14 unsigned editorial, Arabic daily Al Watan says that the people responsible for mobilizing the youth "are known to us. They use the issue of unemployment at one time and naturalization (of foreign Sunnis) at another to justify demonstrations and protests. Those who are not condemning the recent violence and crimes are accomplices." Editor-in-Chief of Arabic daily Akhbar Al Khaleej Anwar Abdul Rahman wrote on March 14 that parents need to pay more attention to raising their children and setting in their hearts and minds the values of patriotism and peace. While the right to protest peacefully is an important pillar in reinforcing democracy, he hopes that parents try to figure out why their sons are so violent.

Comment

¶15. (C) The sporadic small-scale clashes popping up in various parts of the country do not appear to be centrally organized. In the absence of a red light, young men looking for some action will likely continue to provoke police. In this situation, it is the Haq Movement leaders who have the ability to stop the confrontations by way of a clear signal to their followers. Al Wifaq's Ali Salman issued his statement, but Al Wifaq does not control this group. The angry reaction of villagers caught between protesters and police may have come as a surprise to those who favor increased confrontations. It appears that in its haste to provoke the government, the Haq Movement may have overreached and caused a counter-reaction from the very Shia "street" whose support it is trying to attract.

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